

**Bridging Borders: Organizing Short-Term  
Agricultural Communication Study Abroad Programs**

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## **Bridging Borders: Organizing Short-Term Agricultural Communication Study Abroad Programs**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this professional paper is to describe the efforts of the University of Florida and the University of Guelph, located near Toronto, as they jointly developed a pilot exchange program to allow undergraduate and graduate agricultural communication students to think critically about agriculture, agricultural communications, and culture in each other's country. During this exchange, nine University of Guelph students traveled to Florida for one week over their "reading week," and six UF students traveled to Canada during their spring break, in back-to-back weeks. Students met with university administrators and agriculture industry representatives, toured agricultural facilities, and visited cultural locations. Students' critical thinking and perceived international competencies were assessed both before and after the exchange using both qualitative and quantitative instrumentation. This paper details the planning process, culminating in the two-week program, provides students' comments about what they learned during the study abroad experience, and makes recommendations to faculty interested in organizing similar study abroad programs.

## **Bridging Borders: Organizing Short-Term Agricultural Communication Study Abroad Programs**

### **Introduction**

In most businesses today, employers are looking for skills and competencies that extend much further than just technical subject matter. Gorchels, Jambulingham, and Aurand (1999) noted that cultural adaptability and work ethic are traits that could be hired into an internationally related position. Moreover, the authors wrote that adaptability is likely to increase with exposure to different cultures. Others have expressed the need to enhance American colleges' curriculum with international topics and "globalization," in general (Acker, 1999; Fugate & Jefferson, 2001; Moore & Woods, 2003; Redmann, Schupp, & Richardson, 1998; Tritz & Martin, 1997). One typical way to develop international competencies is through an international study tour.

Two other skill sets that employers seek in new employees are effective communication abilities (Herman, 1995) and the ability to make decisions and think critically. The development of critical thinking skills in agricultural audiences has been identified as an especially important need, based on findings which suggest potential deficiencies in terms of students' ability to think critically (Rudd, Baker, Hoover, & Gregg, 2000). Research has suggested a potentially important need to improve the critical thinking dispositions of agricultural communications students (Bisdorf-Rhoades, Ricketts, Irani, Lundy, & Telg, 2005; Telg & Irani, 2005). Pairing an international experience with these skill sets is a strong combination. But how can these important skills be brought together into an effective package?

The University of Florida's Department of Agricultural Education and Communication and the University of Guelph's Ontario Agricultural College, located near Toronto, jointly developed a pilot exchange program that represented a first for each university. The purpose of the exchange was to expose undergraduate and graduate agricultural communication students to

agriculture, agricultural communications, and culture in the other's country, while enhancing their critical thinking abilities. Nine University of Guelph students traveled to Florida for one week over their winter break, and six UF students traveled to Canada during their spring break. Students met with university administrators and agriculture industry representatives, toured agricultural facilities, and visited cultural locations. Students' critical thinking and perceived international competencies were assessed both before and after the exchange using both qualitative and quantitative instrumentation.

The purposes of this paper are:

1. To explain how the University of Florida and the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, developed its study abroad exchange program to teach college students about agriculture, culture, and communications in their respective countries;
2. To describe students who participated in the exchange tour, in terms of their critical thinking and perceptions of their experiences; and
3. To provide recommendations for other universities that want to develop similar agricultural communication study abroad tours.

## **Process**

The idea for an exchange – where students from the University of Guelph would travel to Florida, and UF students would travel to Guelph – came about as a result of discussions at a professional conference in 2003 between the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow faculty advisers at the two institutions. They believed that both sets of students would be intrigued by the opportunity to travel to a different country – still in North America – where they would be able to interact with the students twice: once in their own country and once in the others' country. A study abroad program also would be the stepping stone to begin a more formal

agreement between the two universities for long-term study abroad programs for students in any college major, not just agriculture or agricultural communication. The advisers talked on the telephone and then face to face at the two professional conferences that they attended in 2003.

As planning progressed, the target date was pushed back from spring break 2004 to spring break (or for Guelph, winter break) 2005. Guelph's one-week winter break was the week immediately before UF's spring break (Feb. 19-26 and Feb. 27-March 4, respectively).

Therefore, the exchange would occur in back-to-back weeks. As far as organizers know – after discussions in their universities' international programs offices – this exchange in back-to-back weeks (two consecutive weeks) was a first for either university.

Each instructor secured the help of students to help plan the weeks of activities. UF was responsible for all arrangements (except airfare) for the Guelph students on their trip to Florida. Guelph was responsible for all UF arrangements in Canada (again, not including airfare). These arrangements included ground transportation, lodging, food, entertainment/activities, and educational excursions. Each working group consisted of between three to five students. Each student took one day and planned the activities; therefore, the student was in charge of the overall arrangements for that day: arranging educational speakers/presenters, securing restaurants, and planning entertainment/activities. The only aspect of the day the students were not in charge of was transportation to and from the educational activities and entertainment. Because they were immersed in the planning process for each day's activities, students learned first-hand about special event planning and coordination. During the early planning process, the UF and Guelph planning groups met by telephone conference calls once every three months to discuss where they were in planning the events. About two months before the tour, the groups met about every other week to finalize plans.

Each group wanted to give students from the other university a “taste” of agriculture and communications in the other’s country and state/province, in addition to providing some specific cultural experiences. Each day had a different theme; some of which included the following: “Florida tourism,” “Florida agriculture and communications,” “Guelph agribusiness,” and “Niagara region.”

The students learned about specific agriculture commodities and met with agricultural communicators and policy makers. Examples of the educational activities follow:

- ? Agricultural industry tours:
  - o Florida: citrus, strawberries, feeder cattle, horticulture
  - o Guelph: maple syrup production, horticulture, dairy cows, wineries
  - o Learning about agriculture industries indigenous to that province/state (citrus/FL, maple trees/Guelph)
- ? Policy makers:
  - o Florida Farm Bureau directors; Ontario Minister of Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs
- ? Campus tours
- ? Tour of communication facilities (*Toronto Star*, UF/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences’ Communications Services unit)
- ? Open discussions with farmers
- ? Discussions about policies/issues facing both countries, such as urban sprawl and free trade

As for cultural and entertainment activities, both groups included a variety of experiences, while trying to keep costs affordable. A sample of the culture and fun the students had include the following:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>? <b>In Florida :</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o Disney World’s Magic Kingdom</li><li>o Southern seafood</li><li>o Alligator Farm</li><li>o Day in St. Augustine</li><li>o College basketball</li><li>o Stroll on the beach</li><li>o Lots of sun and humidity</li></ul></li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>? <b>In Canada :</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o A “taste” of Canada dinner, with the author of a cookbook of Canadian cuisine</li><li>o Farmer’s market</li><li>o Niagara Falls</li><li>o Day in Toronto</li><li>o Semi-pro hockey game</li><li>o Ice skating</li><li>o Lots of snow</li></ul></li></ul> |
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Nine students from Guelph traveled to Florida. Of that number, four were graduate students. Eight were students in Guelph's Ontario Agricultural College. From UF, six students traveled abroad; all were from the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, with five from the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication and one from the Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences. One UF student was a graduate student; all others were undergraduates. The advisers also traveled with the student groups.

Many of the students who traveled abroad also helped "host" the other group when they visited, which helped establish a feeling of camaraderie and friendship across the border. Both groups had a welcoming reception on the first day of the respective study abroad tours. Guelph students developed an online newsletter of their travels to Florida, where a student was required to write a short story, along with photographs, and upload the story and photos each day of the trip. Three students from each university took the short-term study tour for academic credit. They were required to research an aspect of the other country's agriculture industry and write a short paper about it. They also made a presentation about the industry they researched.

As for travel expenses, each university developed a firm budget for the other university. The universities tried to keep the expenses – not including airfare – to around \$475-\$500 (USD). Funds were collected from one university's students and then used to pay for the other university's expenses, so that money would not have to be exchanged. However, because Guelph had three more students involved, Guelph paid UF \$1,425 ( $\$475 \times 3$ ) more.

### **Critical Thinking**

In the early planning for the study abroad trips, the major advisers and other faculty members identified a need to integrate a research component into the tour. The advisers decided to examine if an international experience would strengthen students' critical thinking

dispositions. The program provided an opportunity to identify, as well as suggest, some ways to directly connect students' international study tour activities and opportunities to think critically about what they learn and experience. After receiving approval from the University of Florida Institutional Review Board, advisers developed a survey instrument, based on previous research in critical thinking (Bisdorf-Rhoades, Ricketts, Irani, Lundy, & Telg, 2005), to gauge the students' critical thinking abilities. The researchers conducted a pretest/post-test – administering the pretest before the two-week exchange program began and after the program ended – to see if students' critical thinking abilities had increased as a result of being exposed to a study abroad experience. Results from the pretest/post-test measurements of critical thinking disposition, however, were not statistically significant.

Critical thinking skill – the expressed competency – was assessed qualitatively through content analysis of open-ended questions derived from the University of Florida-Critical Thinking Skills (UF-CTS) instrument. The UF-CTS, a four-question, open-ended survey was given to the students, asking them for their responses about their experiences and thoughts during the exchange program. Qualitative measures were appropriate since researchers theorized that the critical thinking skill was contextually based. Fourteen students (six at UF and eight at Guelph) completed the pretest and post-test.

Some of the students' responses to the open-ended questions follow. It should be noted that during the two-week program, two major news stories involving U.S./Canada relations took place: the border remained closed for Canadian beef to enter the U.S. market after it was supposed to open on March 7, and Canada opted out of the missile defense system for North America. Overall, students said that this experience opened their eyes to life and agriculture across the U.S./Canadian border.

### Canadian students:

There were many important messages garnered from this experience; however, I felt that the most important message was that the problems Florida agriculture is dealing with are very similar to those in affecting Ontario agriculture. The major issues that crossed borders were urban sprawl and lack of public awareness. People tend to think that the problems they are faced with only affect them and are unaware that others elsewhere may be dealing with the same issues. This trip opened my eyes to this problem, and taught me to be less self-absorbed.

The main conclusion that I brought back from this experience is that Florida has a thriving agriculture industry that however faces many of the same issues facing Ontario agriculture. However, I do feel that Florida is more advanced in the education aspect of agriculture. They are already spreading the word, and I believe it would be a wise step to analyze in greater detail the successes and failures of their initiatives, so that Ontario can follow suit and bring some of their initiatives to our industry.

One of the most unconvincing things that I saw in Florida is the way that the government is letting farmland be consumed by developers. I think they are thinking way too short-term and need to open their eyes to what Florida is going to look like in another 50 years. This is where I am so satisfied with the initiatives of the Ontario government and their more long-term vision.

My beliefs and opinions have made a drastic shift since my return from Florida. Originally, I had the “Mickey Mouse” idea of Florida, with tourists and a lazy, simple lifestyle. Obviously, I know this was not the case everywhere, but I didn’t realize how much of an impact agriculture has on Florida.

I think the most meaningful message sent out was that as agricultural communication students, we must all work harder to increase public awareness about agricultural issues and the product our sector provides.

### Florida students:

Throughout the week we visited with the Canadian students and were exposed to their perspectives on the border closure as well as other issues in agriculture. Although we may have differed in our opinions, we listened to each other’s views. Being on the other side of the border when the cow trade market was yet again postponed, greatly impacted my way of viewing the trade agreement. Being in another country where livelihoods were at stake caused me to look at the border closure for the global good and in the long run instead of looking at how it was affecting the U.S. cattle producers.

The major conclusion that I have developed is that people do not know about agriculture. Although I already knew it, this trip has reinforced the fact that agricultural communicators are very important in getting the positive word out about agriculture to people who would possibly not know the facts. I also learned that there is not much difference between U.S. and Canadian agriculture. Both countries want to keep their people safe the best way they know how. The issues troubling farmers are also similar.

My beliefs on Canadian agriculture have changed due to the fact that I was not aware of Canada's vast agricultural industry. I now see that Canadian farmers have the same types of problems that American farmers experience.

Before this trip, I really only knew that Canada produced maple syrup and some cattle. I had no idea that Ontario had such good soil and the potential to grow such a wide variety of foods. Especially with regard to the wine industry, I learned that Ontario is producing some of the finest wines in the world. As far as culture goes, I had no idea that the "spirit of the cowboy" could exist anywhere else but America. However, I realized that being a farmer or rancher is about a way of life and an appreciation for the land that goes far beyond the Southern twang.

The most important conclusion I developed was that good agricultural communications is critical to the survival of the ag industry both here and abroad. I realized how unaware the average American/Canadian is about the needs of farmers and ranchers.

## **Recommendations**

Following are recommendations for agricultural communication instructors who are interested in starting similar study abroad programs:

- ? For a week-long study abroad program, try to keep all expenses (including airfare) \$1,000 or less. Much more than that will decrease students' interest in the program.
- ? Develop a theme for each day. The organizers of this study tour found that a daily theme helped students understand what they were about to learn on a given day.
- ? Start the planning process early. In this case, the two-week exchange took more than a year – from initial discussion to final execution – to plan. Study abroad tours can be organized in a much shorter timeframe; however, for first-timers, it is recommended to build in plenty of planning time.
- ? Get help from students and administrators. Students in the planning groups provided massive assistance to the overall program. They organized the days based around this question: "If I had never been to Florida/Ontario, what would I want to know/do?" They then planned the days accordingly. Administrators provided funding for the advisers to travel and meet with the touring groups.
- ? Call upon recent graduates and agricultural communication professionals to help. A few well-placed telephone calls and e-mails to professional colleagues – many of whom were graduates of the respective universities – allowed them to have the opportunity to help an international student program. The professionals helped the planning groups arrange tours and provided meals free of charge.
- ? Identify someone in the country you plan to visit to help organize the activities in that country.

- ? Communicate the study abroad experience to others. Guelph students did an online newsletter while they traveled in Florida, and UF students made two presentations to students and faculty about their experiences in Canada.
- ? Tie in many educational experiences and fun activities, but do not overdo it. Give students some “down” time.
- ? If possible, tie in a research angle.
- ? Coordinate the planning. Meet frequently to make sure all issues are addressed before they become problems.

## **Conclusions**

Everyone involved in this project believes it was an overwhelming success. It allowed students to see life from a different perspective. Students developed lasting friendships, learned about agriculture in a different country, learned about international issues (trade, open borders), and learned communication skills and about communication issues. They also applied their two weeks of U.S./Canada relations by analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting their experiences – all hallmarks of critical thinking. Students’ eyes were opened to the issues facing both countries and issues facing only one of the countries. Students in both countries were somewhat stunned that policy makers (Minister of Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs for Ontario and Florida policy makers) would take time out of their busy schedules to talk with college students. They saw first-hand agricultural issues and major news events – border closings, free trade, missile defense, urban sprawl – from the others’ standpoint.

Students in both universities already want to do the exchange again. The advisers involved are looking into ways to make that happen. Also, at least three Guelph students have inquired or formally applied to UF for master’s or doctoral degrees. In addition, the advisers/faculty in both countries already have begun collaboration on joint U.S./Canada agricultural communication research grants. This synergy likely would not have come about without the study abroad experience.

Probably the most telling component of the program is the friendships that were forged. Under the hot, humid Florida sun or in the frigid, snowy cold of the Canadian “maple sugar bush,” students reached out to other students and became fast friends. They danced, laughed, and cried together. At the National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow conference, students from the Guelph/UF exchange greeted each other like long-lost friends. By bringing together agricultural communicators from two cultures now, relationships will be established for when they are professionals later, so they can call upon each other for assistance – and bridge borders.

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